



AEC Pulse Leadership Webinar Session

Clarity, Confidence, and Connection: A Framework for What Top AE Firms Do Differently

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Presented by:

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Fiona Johann, PMP, AEC PM



“Company culture is the continuous pursuit of building the best, most talented, and happiest team we possibly can.”

- Andrew Wilkinson



Introduction

- B.S. & M.S. in Civil Engineering
- Licensed Professional Engineer
- Found success at a reputable firm at a very young age
- Attended iPEC - the top-ranked executive coaching school in the world
- Wrote the best-selling book ***Engineer Your Own Success*** and started providing career coaching and speaking services to engineers



**Anthony Fasano, PE, AEC
PM, F ASCE**

Founder, Engineer,
Lead Trainer and Coach



Engineering Management Institute

Introduction

- PMP-certified Project Manager with a background in higher education leadership
- Partners with AEC professionals to build strong project management and leadership skills
- Experienced in strategic initiatives, program development, and stakeholder engagement
- Focused on helping engineers become confident, effective project leaders



**Fiona Johann, PMP,
AEC PM**

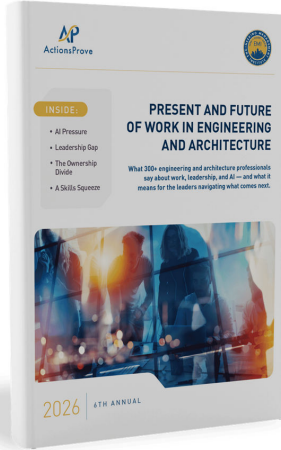
Manager, Strategic
Marketing & Engagement



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The Problem



The AEC Talent and Practice Models are Being Stress-Tested

- Project complexity is rising
- Value propositions are changing
- AI is accelerating change
- Roles are expanding
- Burnout and retention pressure persist



Why This Matters to Leaders

HR and talent leaders are being asked to:

- Develop stronger pipelines
- Support AI and digital adoption
- Improve retention in critical roles
- Do more with limited time and budget

We wanted to understand what professionals are actually experiencing.





About The Research

- 6th annual study
- 400+ independent AEC professionals
- Multiple roles and career stages
- Focus areas: AI, career paths, training, leadership and ownership



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Why This Matters for Firm Performance



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The Hidden Risk for AEC Firms

When capability systems lag behind complexity, firms often see:

- Inconsistent project performance
- Rising burnout in middle roles
- Slower adoption of new technology
- Increased retention pressure



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Overview

- The Three C's framework — *Clarity, Confidence, and Connection* — and why top firms compete on it
- The fourth element that reinforces all three: *Ownership*
- Where to focus first — and how to start this quarter



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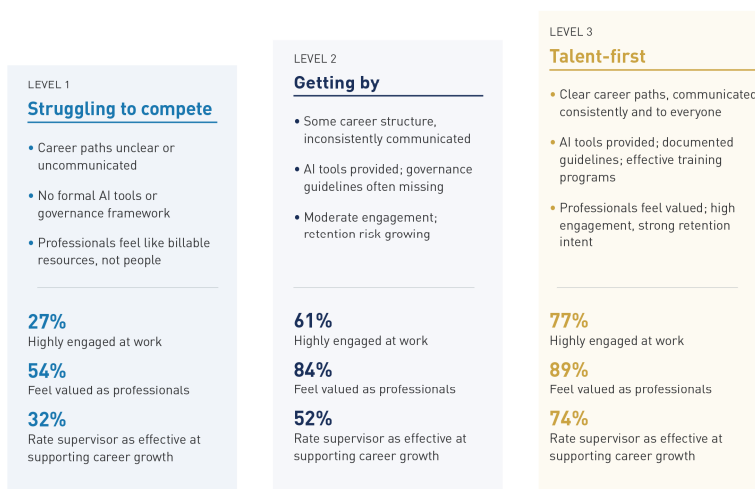
What Talent-First Firms Do Differently



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Talent First Firms

Figure 12 THE TALENT-FIRST ADVANTAGE
Where does your firm sit? Three levels of talent competitiveness — and what separates them.



ActionsProve & EMII 2026



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Four Characteristics of High-Engagement Firms

Clarity

Confidence

Connection

Ownership



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1. CLARITY

Why clarity matters in career development

- High performers disengage when expectations are vague
- Lack of clarity creates inconsistent performance across teams
- Employees can't grow if "what good looks like" is undefined



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1. CLARITY

Communicate Career Paths Consistently

Remove ambiguity in progression

- Show clear paths for growth (lateral and vertical)
- Align managers on how progression is evaluated
- Make expectations accessible and transparent to all employees



1. CLARITY

Define Competencies Clearly

Make success visible and measurable

- Break down roles into specific skills, behaviors, and outcomes
- Go beyond job descriptions—define what excellence looks like at each level
- Ensure competencies are observable, not subjective



1. CLARITY

Tie Advancement to Performance

Create a system people can trust

- Link promotions to measurable outcomes, not perception
- Use consistent evaluation frameworks across teams
- Reinforce fairness to increase motivation and retention





Clarity

1. Communicate Career Paths Consistently
2. Define Competencies Clearly
3. Tie Advancement to Performance



2. CONFIDENCE

Confidence is built—not assumed

- New tools and systems often create uncertainty
- Without support, even top performers hesitate
- Confidence directly impacts adoption and performance



2. CONFIDENCE

Pair Technology with Upskilling

Don't introduce tools without training

- Don't introduce tools without training.
- Provide structured onboarding for new systems
- Offer continuous learning, not one-time sessions
- Focus on practical, role-based application



2. CONFIDENCE

Provide Role-Specific Guidance

Make learning relevant

- Tailor training to actual day-to-day responsibilities
- Avoid generic training that doesn't translate to execution
- Equip managers to coach their teams effectively



2. CONFIDENCE

Build Repeatable Workflows

Reduce friction and decision fatigue

- Standardize processes where possible
- Create templates, playbooks, and best practices
- Enable teams to execute with confidence and consistency



Confidence

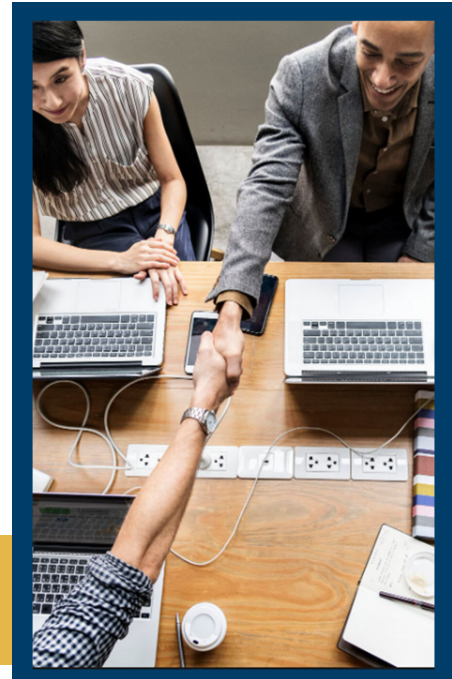
1. Pair Technology with Upskilling
2. Provide Role-Specific Guidance
3. Build Repeatable Workflows



3. CONNECTION

Engagement goes beyond compensation

- Professionals want to feel valued, not just utilized
- Purpose drives stronger performance than pressure
- Connection increases long-term commitment



3. CONNECTION

What is Connection

- The sense that your work matters, that your contributions are recognized, and that the environment you're in is worth staying in.



3. CONNECTION

What Highly Engaged Professionals Experience

- They feel recognized beyond billable output
- They understand how their work contributes to a bigger goal
- They see technology as support—not friction



3. CONNECTION

Build Meaningful Connection

Create an environment people want to stay in

- Recognize impact, not just activity
- Communicate purpose consistently
- Ensure tools and processes reduce—not add—stress





Connection

1. What is Connection
2. What Highly Engaged Professionals Experience
3. Build Meaningful Connection



4. OWNERSHIP

Ownership transforms employees into stakeholders

- People perform better when they feel invested
- Ownership creates accountability without micromanagement
- It shifts mindset from task execution to outcome ownership



4. OWNERSHIP

How to Build Ownership

Make people feel they have a stake

- Involve employees in decision-making where possible
- Tie contributions to business outcomes
- Recognize and reward initiative, not just results
- Formal Options (ESOP)



4. OWNERSHIP

What Happens When Firms Create Ownership

- Higher engagement across teams
- Stronger retention of top performers
- Increased initiative and problem-solving





Ownership

1. What is Ownership
2. How to Build Ownership
3. What Happens When Firms Create Ownership



Summary

- Top firms compete on Clarity, Confidence, and Connections – not perks or pay
- Gaps in career paths, training and AI readiness are directly hitting retention and performance
- Ownership – formal or cultural – turns employees into stakeholders
- The advantage goes to firm that build systems for people, not just processes for tasks





What's Next

Two AEC PM Connect events in 2026



June 10, 2026
Forsgate Country Club
Monroe Township, NJ



October 22, 2026
Johnson County Community College
Overland Park, KC



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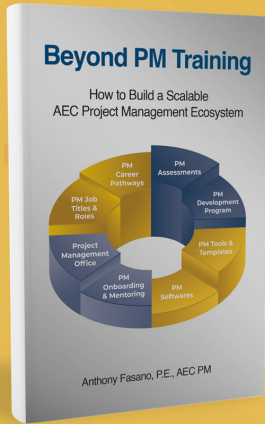
The best PM development ideas rarely come from one expert — they come from the people building these programs inside AEC firms, and that's exactly who shows up at AEC PM Connect.



www.AECPMConnect.com



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